

Exploring Stakeholders' Perspectives on User Involvement in Designing Digital Public Services for Older Adults

Laura Pajula, laura.a.pajula@jyu.fi, University of Jyväskylä

Riitta Hänninen, riitta.j.hanninen@jyu.fi, University of Jyväskylä

Viivi Korpela, viivi.e.korpela@jyu.fi, University of Jyväskylä

Sakari Taipale, sakari.taipale@jyu.fi, University of Jyväskylä

Abstract

The number of digital public services has increased rapidly during the last decade to serve citizens. Digital services, covering a wide set of services from health to taxation to social care, hold the promise to increase citizens' well-being and inclusion. However, not everyone has the same opportunities to utilize these services. Therefore, attention must be paid to potentially vulnerable groups, including older adults. Drawing from the Access Rainbow Model, we investigate user involvement in designing digital public services for and with older adults from the perspectives of various Finnish stakeholders. By combining these perspectives, this research offers new information on the principles to enhance access through user involvement in designing digital public services. First, (1) we ask what the typical challenges for older adults are accessing digital public services according to the stakeholders. Second, (2) we explore how stakeholders view the involvement of older adults in designing digital public services. Our research data consists of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021 among Finnish stakeholders from local-, regional-, and state-level public administrations and non-governmental organizations, forming a pivotal group of stakeholders in the acquisition and design of digital public services. Based on our inductive thematic analysis, we argue that the administration-centric approach to designing digital public services and the fast pace of digitalization may hinder older adults' use of digital services. Despite recognizing the heterogeneity among older adults, stereotypical assumptions about older people seem to influence the design process from stakeholders' viewpoint. Furthermore, the standard of 'one size fits most' was seen as the most reachable outcome to meet the needs of various user groups at present. As no one has presently claimed the responsibility for involving users in the design process, user involvement was viewed as a valuable yet currently unimplemented practice. We also found that more collaboration, support, and continued involvement of stakeholders are needed throughout the acquisition, design, and implementation of digital services. Additionally, results call more attention to how decisions are made at the governance level to ensure access to digital public services for older people. Designing digital services that accommodate the diverse needs of older users and involve them and stakeholders throughout the design process remains challenging. Furthermore, digital inclusion should be considered comprehensively, taking into account the socio-technical aspect, digital literacy, and technical implementation. Reflecting this, it is necessary to shift the focus from merely attributing difficulties to the users or the lack of their skills, as the responsibility lies also on those who acquire and design these services, emphasizing the significance of user involvement and user-friendly design. In the future, more research is needed to evaluate the outcomes of collaborative design projects and their implications on older adults' well-being and digital inclusion.